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OVER THE BORDER

A Stirring Story of the English Parliamentary War

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CHAPTER XXIV—CONTINUED.

VICTORY.

ARMSTRONG was well ahead of the troopers who followed him, and he gained ground at every stride. The pursuers were continually augmented from each lane and alley, and came thundering after the flying man like a charge of cavalry. A turn in the road brought the bridge in sight, and Armstrong saw it was guarded only at the end nearest him, and that merely two lone pikemen. He would mow them down like grass, he said to himself, as he drew his sword.

"Stand aside," he yelled. "The Scot is loose, and we're after him." The men jumped aside, glad they were not called upon to arrest such a progress as they beheld coming down upon them. It was apparently one of their own officers who commanded them, and there was neither time to think nor question. As the horse's hoofs struck the bridge, the deep crash of cannon boomed from the castle, and before the fugitive reached the center, there arose at the other end of the bridge, he could not guess from whence they came, a troop or horse, as if the thunder of the gun had called the company magically from the earth. Big Bruce stopped on the crown of the bridge, at a touch of the rein, quivering with excitement; raised his head and gave a snort of defiance at the blockade ahead of him. Armstrong glanced back; the bridge had closed on him like a trap, both ends stopped by forces impossible for one man to contend against.

"That cannon shot did it. Well planned," he growled to himself, his horse now drawn across the bridge, alert for the word of command, what ever it might be. Below, the swollen Eden, lipping full from bank to bank, rolled yellow and surly to the sea. Right and left, at either end of the bridge stood a mss of steel-clad men, impregnable as the walls of the castle itself. De Courcy sprang off his horse to the bridge and advanced with a valor, which Armstrong sitting there, apprently calm, had not given him credit for.

"He's my man!" he cried. "Shoot him dead if he raises his hand." Then to the Scot: "Surrender quietly. You have no chance. A score of muskets are turned on you."

"If they shoot, some of them will wing you. Better warn them not to fire," returned Armstrong, mildly, as is proffering to a friend advice which did not concern himself.

"Do you surrender?"

"Come and take me, if you are anxious for the thousand pounds. It's worth the money."

The Frenchman hesitated, edging cautiously along the parapet, so that if his friends shot he would be as much as possible aside from the line of fire. Seemingly his confidence in their marksmanship had not been augmented by Armstrong's warning.

"If you raise your hand to a weapon," said De Courcy, "they will fire on you, and I cannot stop them. They will not wait for my word."

"I know. I shall not raise my hand."

The Frenchman dashed forward and seized the bridle of Black Bruce.

"Come quietly!" he shouted.

"I will," said Armstrong. He leaned forward, said sharply to his horse, "Over my lad!" and smote him a rising blow on the shoulder with his open hand. The horse raised his powerful front, and stood poised for a moment like a statue, then launched himself into space. As De Courcy felt his feet leave the stones he let go the rein and fell sprawling on the parapet, but Armstrong leaned over and grasped him by the loose folds of his doublet.

"Come down with me, you traitor!" he cried. There was a scream of terror, and next instant the river roared in his ears. When he came to the surface he shook his head like a spaniel, swept the water from his eyes and looked aloft at the great bridge. The parpet was lined with troopers, all stricken motionless, as if they had been transformed to stone. De Courcy, one moment afloat, shrieked for help, then sank again. Armstrong knew that the paralysis on the bridge would not last long, and he turned his horse toward the bank of raw clay.

"No one in command up there, apparently," he muttered. We must make the most of it, old man."

The panting horse, breathing laboriously, essayed the bank and slipped back. Armstrong let loose his sodden cloak and flung it on the flood, turning the horse that he might take the ascent at an angle. The crowd still stared at his as if it were a show they had come out to see. Bruce, his feet once more on firm ground, shook his mane and gave forth a wild whinny of delight. Now the voice of command came in a blast of anger from the bridge.

"After him, you fools! What are you staring at?"

"Too late my son, I think," ventured William, as he leaped his horse across the ditch that divided the fields from the road. Once the followers came near him, and he turned in his saddle, threatening them with his pistols, and they, forgetting that his powder was water soaked, fell back.

The troopers found no difficulty in believing that a man who jumped his horse over Carlisle bridge into the Eden was directly aided by the devil, as had been rumored, and they made no doubt the powder would soon dry, on such a pit-scorched favorite as he. They felt sure he could put the pistols to deadly use in case of need.

From the moment Bruce struck his hoofs on the road the horses behind had no chance of overtaking him. They fell further and further to the rear, and at last the silvery Esk gleamed ahead, while all along, since pursuit grew hopeless, William had been feasting his eyes on the blue hills of Scotland. He walked his horse thru the Esk, but it, too, had been swollen by the rains, and Bruce again had to swim for it before he reached the other side. William sprang to the ground, flung his arms round the neck of his sterling companion, laying his cheek against that of the horse.

"You've won the race my boy. All the credit is to you, and Bruce, my lad, poets will sing of you."

Then with a choking in his throat, he knelt down and kissed the soil, the sensible horse looking on in wonder.

Cromwell sat rigid not a muscle of the face or body moving. The sword was held as steady as a beam of the roof

As the young man rose to his feet and saw on the other side of the Esk the troopers lining up, his mood changed, and he laughed aloud. Drawing forth his leathern bottle, he held it aloft and shouted to them:

"Come over lads, and I'll give you a drink. Don't be feared; none o' the water got into this."

But the officer dared not cross the boundary. Cromwell's orders had been strict; so he and his men stood glum, making no response to the generous invitation.

"Well, here's to us a,' " cried William, raising the bottle to his lips. "And now, my friends," he continued, replacing the flask and springing into the saddle, "do not be so down in the mouth. You've seen a Scothman run, which was more than your ancestors saw at Bannockburn." And with that he rode for Tarquair castle.

CHAPTER XXV.

ACCOMPLISHMENT.

As evening drew on the old warder of Tarquair castle beheld a sight that caused him to rub his eyes in the fear that they were misleading him. A horseman, bearing the guise of a roundhead trooper, his steel cap glittering, approached the ancient stronghold. That such a man dared to set foot on Scottish soil and ride thus boldly to the home of the most noted royalist on the border, seemed incredible, but the warder was not to be caught napping, and he gave orders that the gates be closed and guarded, for the border was ever a land of surprises, and one must take all precaution. Doubtless this lone trooper had a company concealed somewhere, and was advancing to parley, altho he carried no flag of truce. He came on with a fine air of indifference, and stopped when he found his way barred, sitting carelessly on his horse with an amused smile on his lips.

"What's yer wull, surr?" demanded the warder from the wall.

"That's it," replied the horseman.

"Whut's it? I dinna unnerstaun' ye."

"Wull's ma name," said the rider with an accent as broad as that of his questioner. "Wuz that no' whut ye were spierin? Dinna saun glowerin' there, Jock Tamson, like an oolet or a gowk. Can ye no' see am English? Gang awa' and tell yer maister that a freen o' Cromwell's at th' door an' craves a word wi' him."

"Dod!" cried the bewildered warder, scratching his head, "if ye ha'e a tongue like that on ye since ye crossed the border, ye've made the maist o' yer time."

"Is the Yerl o' Traquir in?"

"He's jist that."

"Then rin awa' an' gie' ma message, for am wet an' tired an' hungary." The warder sought Traquair in his library, where he sat, an anxious man, with many documents spread out on a table before him.

"Yer lordship, there's a soldier in the uniform of the English rebels at th' gates, whu says he's a freen o' Cromwell's, and begs a word wi' ye."

"Ah," said the earl frowning, "they've caught poor Armstrong then, and now in addition to our troubles, we'll need to bargain with that fiend Noll to save his neck. Everything is against us."

"He may be an Englisher, but he's got a Scotch accent as broad as th' Tweed."

"He's one of our countrymen fighting for Cromwell, and therefore thought by that shrewd villian the better emissary. Bring him in."

"There may be others o' his like in hiding, me lord."

"Close the gates after him then, and keep a strict watch. There's no danger on that score yet, but lippen to nothing. This man's just come to strike a bargain an' I'm afraid we must dance to the tune he pipes. Bring him in."

When William and the warder came in together, a moment or two passed before the earl recognized his visitor, then he sprang forward and held out both his hands.

"In God's name, Armstrong, is this you?" he cried. "What have they done to save you? Save as all! Who has shorn and accoutred you like this?"

"The neccesities of the chase, Traquair. This is a disguise, and altho you saw thru it, I'm happy to think I deluded Jock Tamson there."

"Losh!" cried Tamson, peering forward. "Ye'll never threep doon ma throat that this is Wull Armstrong."

"Sir William, if you please, Tamson," corrected the new knight, "The title was bestowed upon me by his majesty himself, and I shall expect that deference from the lower orders, Tamson, which the designation calls for. Still, Jock, I'll forgive your familiarity if you'll help me off with helmet, that seems glued to my skull."

The old man grasped the edges of the steel cap with both his hands when Armstrong bent his head. He braced his foot against that of the helmet wearer and pulled